
November – 2007

Research Notes

Incorporating Screencasts in Online Teaching

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Abstract

Despite success in teaching the class ‘Organization of Information in a School Library Media Center’ (EDCI 545) online, one component continued to be a problem for students, the Dewey Decimal Classification System. To supplement the instruction, a set of simple screencasts was developed to assist distance education students. Benchmarks were established and a beta test conducted. It is expected that the next online class of students will have increased success because of the addition of screencasts. It is suggested that screencasts be considered as an additional tool for online learners across other disciplines, particularly when using databases that have layered sets of information, requiring multiple mouse clicks.

Keywords: Screencasts; cataloging; classification; online learning

Introduction

For several years, EDCI 545, ‘Organization of Information in a School Library Media Center’ has been offered by the College of Education at Montana State University as an online course as part of the university’s Extended University. The course has been offered over the summer as a seven week intensive course, but it is usually a semester long class. In both the intensive and semester-length course, the main components include:

- Professional concepts and tools
- Understanding the online public access catalog
- Intellectual access (authority records and subject headings)
- Classification (Dewey Decimal Classification System)
- Physical description, access, and tagging
- Digital collections
- Future trends

Student success has been high in EDCI 545. Perhaps the main factor is that the students enrolled in this course are graduate students and are highly motivated. Students are usually full-time employees in a school library, either a grade school or high school. What they learn in class is directly applicable to their workplace. Additionally, class size has been limited to 25 students, allowing for individualized attention. Most students were already familiar with the intricacies of online learning, such as submitting assignments as attachments, participating in online

discussions, or retrieving electronic reserves. Despite the overall technical knowledge and success of these online learners, one component has consistently been a problem for students, even for those that achieve the highest grades.

The problem unit is ‘Classification,’ specifically, instruction in the Dewey Decimal Classification System. Perhaps viewed by some as arcane in the online environment, the Dewey system does have its uses, particularly in the K-12 school library environment. Although revised over many editions, the classification system remains a classic example of ‘nested’ or ‘embedded’ information. For example, a book about Queen Elizabeth would be placed in the classification number 942.055. Each number more thoroughly defines the detailed placement of the book and its relation to other books. That portion of the Dewey schedule shows the following:

900	History & geography
940-990	History of the modern world
940	Europe
942	British Isles
942.05	Tudor England
942.055	Queen Elizabeth I

With instruction in the traditional classroom, it is possible to flip through the paper volumes of the Dewey schedules and physically point down the pages to show students that they need to keep refining the classification numbers to arrive at the most exact classification number. To complicate matters, the schedules also include references to separate tables with yet other layers of classification numbers.

Obviously scanning the pages of the paperbound Dewey schedules is not possible in the online environment for the distance education students. In the last semester the course was offered, students enrolled were from seven different states and one foreign country. Most had no access to a paper edition of the Dewey schedules. Instead, all registered students were given temporary student access to the online version of the Dewey Decimal Classification schedule through the Online Computer Library Center (OCLC) network (see www.oclc.org). Since the Dewey schedules are the most widely used throughout the world, online access to ‘WebDewey’ is becoming increasingly popular for a variety of users.

The most widespread student problem was not clicking far enough into the schedules in order to refine the Dewey number. Like many online databases with several layers of information, multiple clicks were necessary to arrive at the correct information. Other students missed notes of instruction within the Dewey schedules with directions to separate online tables. Although many students asked for individual assistance through email, it was still not possible to show them physically where to click in the online schedule, and email responses included complicated written instructions.

Theory Behind Screencasts

Screencasts are a relatively new phenomena, described only twice in the library literature and used primarily for library tutorials (Notess, 2005; Roberts, 2005). Outside of Library and Information Science, a review of the Education literature revealed no use of screencasts in online

teaching. While attending a workshop for library tutorials, screencasts relevance to assist distance education students became apparent.

What are screencasts? Screencasts are recordings of a video of screen activities, including mouse movements and clicks. An audio commentary can be added to the video to explain the process. The clear advantage to a screencast is that it can visually show students what the screen should look like and where to click. Another definite advantage is that screencasts are relatively quick to prepare and easy to update and change. Additionally, screencasts can contain sound along with the video, interactive features that help hold students' interest. Because of the licensing restrictions outside of the instructional use of the OCLC network, it is not possible to post specific Dewey examples in this article. For multiple examples, a collection of screencast examples using a variety of software is available at <http://www.notess.com/screencasting/examples/>. Examples include those for searching complicated databases such as WebDewey.

There are at least four good options in developing useful screencasts. *Screencast-O-Matic* and *Wink* are both free software options. *Camtasia* (developed by TechSmith) and *Captivate* (developed by Macromedia) come with a charge, but each offers a substantial educational discount. As one might expect, the fee-based software options have additional features with more detailed user instructions.

Research

For the last class of EDCI 545, overall class grades were very high. Of those 25 students, however, only one received the full 20 points for the Dewey classification assignment. These very capable students were lacking something other than their normal acumen for the class in the online environment. Comments after the assignment and in the final course evaluation specifically pointed to the problems with WebDewey. One student succinctly stated the problem. "Besides using the WebDewey, I also went to our public library and looked up the following class numbers with the Dewey Classification volumes. It seemed that I couldn't go very far on the WebDewey so I thought if I used the print version I might find more information which I did." However, it was this comment that prompted further action to supplement the assignment. "The Dewey assignment was very confusing and more explanation would have been helpful. Possibly a video lecture about Dewey with some visuals to help with understanding all the nuances of the system (tables, etc.)."

In response to student comments, the author began exploring a video production or screencasts to supplement the Dewey assignment. Screencasts were chosen because they can be assembled with free software, and can take less than 20 minutes to complete. Since EDCI 545 will not be offered again until 2008, a beta group of three students was assembled to test the Dewey screencasts. All students affirmed that they were much more capable of navigating the Dewey database online because of the screencasts. Although reaction was extremely positive, the true test of the Dewey screencasts can only be made when a new class is assembled for the 2008 semester. Student grades on the Dewey assignment will be compared to those from the last semester and the same course evaluation will be administered.

Conclusion

Screencasts can be used to supplement teaching materials or as an insert to email inquiries from distance education students. Although often used for library tutorials, such as explaining an online database, they hold great potential for distance education students using those and other online tools. Certainly as online classes proliferate, the need to give students assistance with online databases will increase. Screencasts can be created to assist with a particular online resource, such as the OCLC database. Screencasts can also be prepared in response to student email queries, then saved and sent to other students with the same question. Certainly screencasts can be applicable across all disciplines for online learners.

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